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Unmotivated Detective Work

Case 2: A Trap, you Mean a Narrative Trick

by Kusutani Tasuku

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Problem

Part 1

“Come to think of it, Chizuru, did you ever use that fifty thousand yen?”

On Beppu Ageha’s question, Kirishima Chizuru tilted his head.

“You mean the fifty thousand I got from Officer Atami for solving that murder case?”

Chizuru replied in his same easy-going tone as ever. Chewing on some dried squid.

“What else could I be talking about? It’s not like you got a job or anything... so did you?”

Chizuru continued chewing on the squid as he shook his head to the side. Even within Yumoto Academy, the top prep school in the prefecture, they belonged to the especially distinguished special class of the high school division. Within such a class’s home room, Chizuru was about the only one you’d ever find munching down on dried squid. That being the case, his classmates were already long used to it, so without paying it any mind, they devoted themselves towards preparing for fifth period.

Taking ample time to swallow his meal, Chizuru vaguely broke into speech.

“Even if I look like this, I have an eye on the future. Even if I have fifty thousand yen as temporary income, I can’t quite expend it, can I? To make sure I can live without working a day in my life, I have to start saving money bit by bit from here.”

“You can’t say someone working with the premise of never working again has an eye on their future...”

Ageha let out a deep sigh.

“Well, if it were me, I’d pour all fifty thousand of it into magazines, so I doubt I’m one to speak. But when I look back on it now, isn’t it real bad for the police

to do something like that? Have a student deduce the truth and give him cash for it?”

“It’s all about the right person in the right place. I’m a genius, so when it comes to deductions, I can make a product at a level the customer will be satisfied with. And Japan’s a capitalistic country, and we live in an information society. If you want to obtain some sort of information, it’s only natural to pay an appropriate price.”

“And as always, you’re a master in the art of bullshittery... and you shouldn’t call yourself a genius.”

After letting out a fed-up voice, Ageha remembered something, and changed the topic.

“It’s been a week since you resolved that case, but did any requests come in from Officer Atami?”

“No, none. I didn’t give him my contact information.” Chizuru sparingly bundled together what remained in the empty bag of squid, “But if he doesn’t want to use my services, someone else will find need for them. We learned that in school.”

“So it never occurred to you to go talk to him yourself?”

“He’s the one with the request. When you want someone to do something for you, you have to go to them and ask nicely. My elementary school teacher said it.”

“You’re way too condescending...”

After letting out a fed-up voice of the highest degree, Ageha hit her hands together like a teacher trying to gather students’ attention.

“But that’s all the better in this case,” she said in a radiant voice, “Because someone’s in need of your services”

Chizuru looked on blankly as the squid bag left his hands.

“Eh? What are you talking about?”

“Oh, didn’t I say it? There’s someone who wants to request the investigation of a case to you.”

“... Hah?”

“You see, when I was talking about how you pinned down the culprit in that

case, there was a kid who bit onto it. So they promised they'd come see you lunch break today..."

"Hey, wait," Chizuru kept his languid tone as he tried to panic with all his might.
"I never heard about that. And wait, today's lunch break is... right now!"

Chizuru's torso that had been leaned over his desk swiftly jerked up. From the surrounding classmates, "Kirishima raised his voice!?" "Kirishima moved!" many mouths were leaking words of surprise.

And it was precisely at that moment, that that individual entered the special classroom.

"Ah, Yuzu-chan, here! Over here!"

Ageha waved her hand at the one who had come in.

The student she called Yuzu-chan looked at her and smiled, wandering over towards Chizuru. Small build, with a delicate impression. While wearing a dress shirt, the area around Yuzu's sleeves had some to spare. Those small arms and legs somewhat gave off the impression of a small animal. Skin white as snow, and black hair to engender a dangerous contrast. That hair's a bit short for a girl's, or so Chizuru thought absentmindedly.

"Ageha-sanpai, I'm sorry! I'm late."

"Don't worry about it, we're all good. Ah, this guy is Kirishima Chizuru."

Chizuru was so flustered being called a this didn't irritate him. The jersey the supposed requestor wore was a blue that indicated a first-year student. With the way they exchanged words with Ageha, it was clear this student was his junior. What's more, even to Chizuru who barely had any interested in women, in regards to this junior, they had an appearance so cute his mind's ascertainment system automatically identified them as a, 'beautiful girl'.
... This made it difficult to deny a request. So Chizuru was in terrible dismay.

"Yay! Pleasure to meet you, Chizuru-senpai."

The junior Ageha called Yuzu-chan said that with a wave and a smile.
Why his first name, all of a sudden, Chizuru hesitated, but he realized he didn't quite hate it.

"Um... so is there something troubling you?"

Chizuru carefully chose out his words. Without harming the other party, he was trying to think up a means to avoid trouble. But that wasn't going as he hoped, and Chizuru had felt as if his own brain cells had been rendered useless.

"That's right!" said Yuzu-chan, "I'm really troubled here... Ageha-senpai said she had a great detective as a friend, so I couldn't help but come over to consult. I'm sorry for coming in unannounced."

"Yeah," Chizuru spoke impatiently, "For now, could you introduce yourself?"
"Ah, I'm sorry! I'm Tsukioka Yuzuki! Though it's embarrassing to have such a girly name. Ah, Ageha-senpai was my senior in the wind ensemble back in middle school."

"I see. So, Tsukioka-san, what did you..."

Chizuru knit his brow.

"Wait a second, could you repeat that?"

"I'm Tsukioka Yuzuki."

"No, a little further."

"Ageha-senpai was my senior in the wind ensemble back in middle school."

"One step back."

"I-it's embarrassing to have such a girly name, but... oh, Chizuru-senpai! Don't make me say it so many times!"

"... A girly name... is the 'ly' really necessary...?"

"Yes, um..."

"Chizuru," Ageha held her mouth to contain her laughter, "Yuzu-chan is a boy."

Chizuru unintentionally kicked back his chair and stood. A second impact wave ran through the classroom.



"U-um, Chizuru-senpai. Don't worry about it. It's quite often that I'm mistaken for a girl."

"... Yeah, I'm sure. But I'm sorry."

"I appreciate your concern."

As Yuzuki called out to console Chizuru, who lay dejectedly over his desk, Chizuru sent over a glance.

"So, anyways... what was it again? Tsukioka-sa... kun's problem?"

Even now that he knew his consultant was male, his instincts that made it hard to refuse wouldn't die down. That was likely a problem of Yuzuki's looks that had surpassed the wall of gender.

"To put it simply, it's theft. I want you to track down the culprit."

Yuzuki gave a brief summary.

"Both my parents work with old pieces of art, so there are lots of pots and hanging scrolls in our house's storage. The problem is that one of them's been stolen... it seems."

Chizuru tilted his head, "It seems?"

"Well you see... it all started half a year ago; my parents were placed overseas for work. So me and my ten-year-older brother ended up living together with our newly appointed housekeeper. Both me and my brother are at an age where we can make it just the two of us, but the house is a big one, and cleaning it is a hassle. But looking after the art pieces alone has always been left to a specialist."

Yuzuki took a deep breath and left a space of silence. From there he continued with a somewhat nervous tone of voice.

"... The incident happened a week ago. That specialist who comes once per week... apparently they're called a conservator... they came, and were doing the maintenance as usual, but there he suddenly shouted out."

"That a piece was missing?"

Ageha, who'd yet to hear the details herself, asked away.

Yuzuki gave a hesitant groan.

"A little different... it wasn't real, is what he said."

"Meaning an art piece of value was swapped out with a cheap counterfeit by someone's hands. Is that what it is?"

On Chizuru's words, Yuzuki nodded joyfully.

"Right, that's it! Um, that conservator, well he's called Kondou-san... according to Kondou-san, a vase worth two million yen was switched out for

something worth forty thousand at most.”

“T-two million became forty thousand!? That’s quite a margin,” Ageha opened her eyes, “Just how many thin books could I buy with that fortune!?”

“Calm down, Ageha,” Chizuru didn’t seem moved at all, “Even so, you sure seem calm, Tsukioka-kun.”

“Well my brother and I aren’t knowledgeable at all on our parent’s collection. Because of that, the crime came to light two weeks too late.”

“... Which means you know when the theft took place?”

“Yes. Kondou-san said the vase was definitely real a month before he noticed the switch. The storage the pot was kept in was locked the whole time, and there weren’t any signs of a break-in. In that one-month space, the storage was only ever opened once, so the culprit must have used that time... ah, lunch break is over. What should we do? I’m not done yet.”

“Then can’t you just come back after school?”

Ageha made a proposal.

“Ah, you’re right! Hmm, but is it really alright? Making a request to Chizuru-senpai?”

Chizuru thought a moment. He tried weighing various things. How much of a pain it would be, the weight of a robbery, the cuteness of his junior.

“... Did you bring it to the police?”

“We did inform them, but it’s the fact it was switched out that makes things difficult. The only trace something was stolen is from Kondou-san’s words, so the police can’t properly act. We are speaking with someone from an insurance company, and they’re coming over today. There’s insurance on every item in that storage, after all...”

“... I see.”

At that moment, a revelation descended unto Chizuru’s head. Today was Thursday.

“Then can I come over to investigate the incident today?”

“Yes, of course. I’d welcome it...”

“No way, what’s wrong with you Chizuru!?” Ageha raised her voice in dismay, “For you to want to investigate a case yourself... Just yesterday you said,

‘walking home is a pain,’ didn’t you!? Something’s wrong! Or could it be that? Not a disease, but love? Wow, so Chizuru’s finally...”

“But Tsukioka-kun.”

Chizuru cut off Ageha’s exhilarated cries, “There’s something I must ask of you.”

“Yes? Very well, I’ll do whatever you want!”

“Tonight, see, I need you to go to a specific place and study for three hours.”

“... Yes?”

“Ah...” Ageha seemed to have realized something, “I see, today’s...”

“Do you know the IOU Seminar? In front of the station?”

“IOU, is it? Yes, I know it. As I recall, Ageha-senpai attended it too.”

“Right. Me and Chizuru.”

“So here’s the gist,” Chizuru abruptly stiffened his expression, “In my place, I want you to go to cram school. Don’t worry, they don’t call attendance or anything. You just have to swipe my card as you enter the building. Just study in their study room for around three hours.”

Yuzuki blinked a couple of times, in a strange voice,

“I don’t mind, but is there any meaning to that?”

“My guardian’s a bit of a pain, see. My entry and exit log is sent straight to their cellphone in an unnecessary system instituted under the pretense of securing my safety, meaning I want to falsify it.”

“You’re showing off your useless side to your junior, Chizuru...”

“Um, I’m fine with that. What time does the seminar start?”

“Five thirty.”

“Umm, school ends four thirty, and it’s a twenty minute walk to my house... from there, a ten minute bike to Yumoto Station, so... Chizuru-senpai, could you come to my house tomorrow instead?”

“Why’s that?”

“Because you’ll only be able to stay at my house thirty minutes at most today.”

“That’s fine.”

Chizuru answered with a straight face.

“If I see the scene, I’ll know the culprit in an instant.”



The fifth period warning bell rang out, and with a promise to meet at the gate after school, Yuzuki returned to his classroom.

Chizuru sent some resentful eyes towards Ageha in the seat beside him.

“Please don’t do something like that again.”

“Something like that?”

“Accepting investigation requests on your own.”

Ageha grinned, “But you properly accepted this one, without even demanding any reward.”

“He’s going to cram school in my place, after all.”

“Just how much do you hate cram school...”

“Well, rather than listening to lessons I already fully understand for three hours, it’s easier to solve a mystery for thirty minutes.”

Ageha smiled, “Ahaha, how irritating,” came her refreshing rebuke. Chizuru sent her a sidelong glance, and started into some strained conversation.

“... But Ageha. I want to confirm something.”

“Yeah?”

“That kid... really is a boy, right?”

“That’s right! Isn’t Yuzu-chan cute?”

Ageha had a look of excitement.

“A true honest-to-goodness trap. Ah, I don’t mean what you set to catch things. Among our rotten legions, the voices against traps aren’t few, but I’m enthralled by them! Ah, but rule thirty four is no good! The meaning lies in the fact he is in fact a boy.”

“... Your Japanese is sometimes a bit hard to understand.”

He didn’t understand around half of what came out of her mouth, but it did seem to be a fact that Tsukioka Yuzuki was a boy.

... Still, when Chizuru had been given an over-inflated title of great detective, would Yuzuki really trust someone who mistook his gender? Chizuru was a little anxious. When up to that point, he had rarely ever cared whether someone trusted him or not.

It was probably because he’d barely ever been depended on by someone younger.

As he thought over such things, Chizuru grew sleepy. The fifth period chime as his lullaby, he fell into soft slumber.



“Chizuru-senpai!”

As Chizuru waited with Ageha by the school gates, Tsukioka Yuzuki raced over.

“Did I keep you waiting?”

To Yuzuki who broke a sweat as he came, Chizuru sent a light glance.

“Don’t worry, we’ve barely waited a minute and thirty seconds.”

“No, shouldn’t you normally say you just got here...”

Ageha fiddled with her smart phone as she threw in a reflexive retort. On the case of her phone— as if to signify its owner— was a picture of a butterfly. But the dangling mess of anime character straps gave such a strong impression that few would care to notice the code.

Ageha put it away in her pocket before leaving the gate.

“Then I’ll be off.”

“You’re not coming along, Ageha-senpai?”

“I’ll go do some self-study at the cram school. Unlike a certain someone, I’m an average human being, so I have to put in some effort to keep up. While I do have an urge to see you two get to know one another better, it would be more fun for you to deepen your bonds without me around. Well then, Bye-bye.”

“Yes, take care.”

Leaving behind Yuzuki’s admirable response, and Chizuru’s feeble wave, Ageha made off towards the station.

Once she had left, Chizuru looked at Yuzuki. White shirt and dress pants. If he had been wearing that when they first met, then he would definitely have been able to tell he was a boy, or so Chizuru cried sour grapes in his head. But distinct male clothing contrarily increased his young impression, making him look like a fresh middle school student.

“Let’s go, Chizuru-senpai. Also, it’s a pleasure to be working with you!”

“... Yeah.”

They walked all the way down Yumoto Boulevard. Sidewalks and roadways, with a path cleanly cut off for bicycle use, that main street was quite wide in breadth. The two walked alongside one another.

It was almost May, and a time where these parts would gradually grow hotter. The days were stretching out, and in this time period before five, he still sweat a little.

“It’s a bit hot today.”

Yuzuki faithfully undid the first button of his tucked-in dress shirt. Peeking at the vague line of his sweaty white nape, Chizuru averted his eyes a bit.

“Chizuru-senpai, don’t you feel hot wearing a blazer and hoodie?”
“Hmm, let’s see. Well I’d have to say I do. But changing out is a pain, and changing to something else for summer is also a pain, so I pretty much spend all year in a hoodie, I guess.”

Yuzuki laughed, “What’s with that, you’re an interesting one, senpai,” he seemed cheerful from his heart.

Seeing him like that, Chizuru couldn’t help but want to ask.

“Hey, Yuzuki-kun. Do you trust me at all?”

“? Yes, of course I do.”

“... Even when I mistook you for a girl?”

Yuzuki gave a cheerful smile.

“That’s happens every day. And it’s my fault for having such a misleading appearance.”

“... No, no. That’s going too far, isn’t it?”

“You sure are kind, Chizuru-senpai. Ah, come to think of it, you called me Yuzuki just now. Not Tsukioka.”

“Yes, I did, but...”

Come to think of it, perhaps he did. Because a gender-neutral name like Yuzuki fit the boy perfectly, he had been calling him so in his heart all the way. That was probably why.

“I’m happy to have someone call me by my first name. In that case, you don’t have to add on a –kun.”

Calling a junior, what's more, a boy who looked like a girl by first name, had a sort of awkwardness associated with first experiences. But to Chizuru who primarily thought conversing with people was a pain to begin with, even shortening something by the three letters of –kun was something to be thankful for.

"I see, then Yuzuki."

Yuzuki gave a full-face smile.

"Thank you! Chizuru-senpai!"

... He sure is cute. Though he's a guy.

Chizuru felt an indescribably itchy sensation.

To what started as somewhat a pain, he had become so emotion attached. As expected, he couldn't decline... well I'll solve the case in an instant, and he'll go to cram school for me. Unlike that murder case from before, this is a robbery, so I doubt it's too serious...

At that moment, Chizuru still had that mindset.

Part 2

“Yes, here we are. This is my house.”

“I see... it’s huge.”

Yuzuki’s house, or rather the width of its outer wall made Chizuru leak a reserved voice of wonder. Overreacting would expend energy so he held back, but in all truth, he was relatively taken aback.

Varnished walls you might find in the central districts of Kyoto. Such furnishings reached what looked to be three meters in height. They extended quite a ways, giving one an idea of just how vast the property inside must be. The tightly-shut gate of wood was made in classical Japanese style, but it was likely furnished with sturdy mechanical apparatus.

“My grandparents were fine art dealers just like my parents, and quite rich in their own right. But it’s simply too vast, and with just me and my brother living here, that just makes it a pain to clean. So we hired a housekeeper, and we’re living here just the three of us.”

“I do recall you saying that. But still, this is amazing. Our school’s a famous private school, so there are quite a few celeb parents around, but it’s the first I’ve ever seen a house so vast.”

“Even when I’m not the amazing one, you’re making me blush,” Yuzuki’s naturally rosy cheeks turned even redder, “But your house must be something too, right? Your family’s rich enough to send you to IOU, after all.”

Chizuru made a dubious expression.

“Not at all. Yumoto Academy’s special class is exempt of paying tuition, and I have a scholarship at the cram school as well. My ‘guardian’ is half-way to being a NEET.”

“Eh~, that sounds more amazing to me! When it really comes down to it, I’m just going to school on my parent’s money. Respect. Huh? But isn’t your guardian...”

“A novelist. Writes those so-called light novels. Though in these past few

months, they haven't put out a single book."

"Are you talking about your mother? I heard from Ageha-senpai that your father worked with the police..."

Chizuru's expression turned even more vague, "Well, how should I put it... my real parents and my 'guardian' are separate," is all he would say, and as if to urge Yuzuki on, his pointed at the gate.

Noticing Chizuru wanted to avoid this topic, Yuzuki spoke,

"Ah, right you are! We don't have much time to spare!"

And hurriedly jumped at the intercom button.

After the chime sounded out, 'Yes?' came the voice of a woman.

"It's Yuzuki. I'm home."

'Welcome home. I'll open it up.'

Was that voice from the housekeeper, thought Chizuru as the gate went and opened on its own. It operated on electricity after all.

Inside the gate was a scene you might find in a sightseeing guidebook of Kyoto. On the right side of the entrance was a large oriental mansion. On the left side, a vast garden expanded out. With a pond and brook, there was even a small bridge built to span it. On the mansion side, small stones were spread out in a dry landscape garden, but across the brook was an area of green lawn. It was dotted with various forms of vegetation.

And right now, pruning one of those plants was a man of small build.

"That's Sazanami-san the gardener. We have him come every Thursday."

Noticing Yuzuki call his name, Sazanami looked towards the two of them and gave a curt bow. The hair that escaped the towel wrapped around his forehead was blond, and his sharp eyes naturally gave off an impression as if he was glaring.

"He's a bit quiet and he looks scary, but he's not a bad person."

Yuzuki sensed the air, and provided dome support. And there, he pointed to the back of the garden.

"Oh, look over there."

Where he pointed was a separated building. Looking as if made of solid plaster, it was apparently the storage in question. It was connected to the main building by a single passage. While that passage had a roof over it, it didn't have any walls. The floor was also connected to a veranda of the main house, and there was an open space under the floorboards.

I see, even if they don't let you into the main house, as long as you can get in the yard, you can get close to the storage... Chizuru stored that tidbit in his head.

Chizuru entered the parlor behind Yuzuki. From the house's depths came a woman possibly in her forties. With her hair tied into one strand and an apron over her body, nothing would feel off if she proclaimed herself Yuzuki's mother, but this person was quite likely the housekeeper.

"Welcome back, Yuzuki-san... and you brought a friend with you?"

"I'm home. Yeah, a friend, or rather a senior at school."

"Oh, is that how it is? Then I'll prepare some iced tea."

"I'll leave it to you. Thank you, Wakamatsu-san."

The housekeeper named Wakamatsu smiled in reply before going off into one of the doors.

It was a Japanese-styled home, with sliding screens lining the right side wall from the entrance, but the left was nothing but practical-looking western wood doors. It was a bit mismatched to call it a successful cultural fusion.

Yuzuki pointed at the door Wakamatsu entered.

"Then for now, let's go to the living room."

Under his urgings, Chizuru was led towards a room of western-styled flooring. That room was an overly working-class living room, and over at the open kitchen, they could see Wakamatsu busy at work.

"Ah, have a seat."

Chizuru sat across from Yuzuki. The table was western as expected. Removing his blazer and sitting back in his chair, "This room is relatively western styled," Chizuru gave his honest impression.

Yuzuki gave a faint smile, "It was my mother's idea to add it on around ten years ago."

After Wakamatsu put out tea, she said she had to take in the laundry, and excused herself from the room.

As Yuzuki saw her off, he opened his mouth to say “Um...” but he was cut off part way. Passing Wakamatsu by, a young man entered the room. “Oh, Yuzuki! You’re back!” he called out.

Tall, with a robust body, extending out from his running vest were arms where muscles flourished. A tanned face with shining white teeth. Who could it be, or Chizuru had his doubts when Yuzuki let out quite an impactful statement.

“Yeah, I’m home nii-chan!”

Nii-chan!? Chizuru almost spit out his tea, but he narrowly endured it. He had never imagined Yuzuki’s brother to be this gallant paragon of sportsmanship. Like Yuzuki, he had imagined a man with at least some feminine features.

“Oh, and that young man is?”

“Yeah, he’s the great detective Kirishima Chizuru-senpai!”

“I see. Then you took up my little brother’s request? That’s great news. I’m Yuzuki’s big brother, Tsukioka Kansuke. We’re in your care, Chizuru-kun.”

“Ah, thanks...”

Kansuke’s voice was grand, and it travelled well, somewhat giving the sense of a P.E. teacher. A type Chizuru was relatively bad at dealing with.

Even so...

“Yuzuki, you told your brother about me?”

“Yes. Oh, was I not supposed to? In that case, I’m sorry.”

“No, you’re fine.”

An innocent highschooler like Yuzuki was one thing, but to a working member of society, a high school student investigating criminal activity was nothing to laugh at... or so he thought to himself. But looking at the Kansuke in question, he saw eyes of expectation showering down upon him, and some jovial nods... It seems this big brother had an optimistic nature that even exceeded Yuzuki’s.

And Kansuke suddenly hit his hands together.

“Ah, right, right. Kondou-san’s here right now...”

He said. Kondou would be the conservator Yuzuki spoke of around noon.

"Kondou-san? Huh, didn't he just come over a week ago?"

"Yeah, he did, but you see last week he found out the vase had been switched out, right? So he was quite flurried, and there are still some pieces he hadn't properly performed maintenance on yet. So he said he'd come over on his own time. That's how it is, so Chizuru-kun can look at the storage a little later... for now, wouldn't it be better you gave him info on the case?"

"Yeah, you're right. Then what are you going to do, nii-chan?"

"At five on the dot... so just a little later... someone from the insurance company is supposed to come, so I'll deal with them. Right, right, Ushijima-san promised she'd come over at six, so if I'm not done talking to the insurance company person at that time, could I leave her to you, Yuzuki?"

"Yeah, that's fine. Umm, Ushijima-san's coming to return that vase from before, right?"

"That's right. Then it's all yours. Thanks."

With those words, Kansuke went off.

"Ushijima-san? You said something about a vase."

"Ah, I haven't told you yet. She's curator of the Yumoto Modern Art Museum. She, or rather the museum borrowed one of our vases... and that's a bit relevant to our current case. Should I get into the details?"

"Oh, before that... could I use your restroom?"

By Yuzuki's instruction, Chizuru headed for the bathroom in a straight line from the entranceway. As he walked, he counted the people who'd come out so far in his head. Tsukioka Yuzuki, his brother Kansuke, the housekeeper Wakamatsu, The gardener Sazanami. As for those he had yet to meet, the conservator Kondou, and the curator Ushijima. There was also an investigator from the insurance company coming over. If he added himself to the mix, that would mean eight people would be gathered at the house.

Now then, strictly how many were suspects? He had had to quickly hear the story from Yuzuki and pin the culprit down...

On his return from the bathroom, in his walk down the corridor, he saw three individuals stuck in conversation around the entrance. One was Tsukioka Kansuke who'd he'd met not a moment ago. The other two were a man and woman he'd never seen before. While both the man and woman wore glasses

and a suit, the displeased-looking man with his hair tightly slicked down gave off a completely different expression from the confused woman with her hair in a fluffy short bob-cut.

Kondou was supposedly at work in the storage right now, so by process of elimination they would have to be the insurance investigator, and madam Ushijima.

“What!? The promise was for six? I’m sorry! I was sure it was five!”

Covering her mouth, a confused Ushijima lowered her head alongside Kansuke towards the other one.

“Good grief.”

The insurance inspector’s brow narrowed in displeasure as he pushed up the bridge of his silver-rimmed glasses.

“Mistaking an appointed time by a whole hour is unbecoming of any businessperson.”

“I’m sorry...”

“Now, now,” Kansuke forced his way in. “Just leave it at that, Kuragano-san. Um, then since you’re here and all, Ushijima-san, could you look around the reference room or something? We don’t have anything as valuable as in the storehouse, but there are quite a few pieces of my father’s collection. Once I’m done talking with Kuragano-san, I’ll come and get you.”

“I’m sorry for all this, Tsukioka-san.”

Ushijima seemed dispirited. “Now come in,” Kansuke urged the two of them to step into the house.

That flow up to now was observed by Chizuru as he passed down the hall. To him, both the new visitors lent a glance.

When he passed Ushijima by, their eyes met for a moment, and they exchanged a nod. But Kuragano ignored him. And following Kansuke’s lead, he entered one of the doors. From the glimpse of a sofa set he got of that space beside the living room, it was probably a receptions room. For the time being, it seemed Kansuke would deal with him there. Meanwhile, the duralumin case in Ushijima’s hands likely contained ‘that vase from before’.

After taking a light glance at all those happenings, Chizuru returned to the

living room.

“I’ve kept you waiting, Yuzuki.”

“Ah, Chizuru-senpai. Nii-chan was answering the intercom just now, so we must have some visitors.”

“You sure do. A person called Kuragano from the insurance company, and Ushijima-san.”

“You can tell when you’ve never met them before?”

“Well yeah, they were calling each other by name.”

“Ah, I see... um, then to get right to it, should I tell you what happened?”

“If you would.”

It was a few minutes passed five, so in order to make it in time for the cram school, he would have to solve the mystery in just under twenty minutes. But even that being the case, the one who had to rush wasn’t Chizuru, but Yuzuki. “Now then,” Yuzuki started out. “Last week, in the middle of his maintenance of the art pieces, Kondou-san noticed one of the vases in the storage had been swapped out for a fake... That’s about as far as we’d gotten, right?”

“Yeah.”

“In his handling of it a month before, he vouched that the vase was definitely real. So in the month between his last appraisal and when the trickery was uncovered, it would have to have been swapped out. My parents are currently out overseas, and in their absence, my brother holds the only key to the storage in existence. Our parents have heavily urged him to always keep it on his person. So under normal circumstance, the only ones able to swap the vase out... I don’t really want to say this sort of thing, but... it would either have to be my brother with the key, or Kondou-san during his maintenance. Am I correct?”

“You’re not mistaken.”

“But I can’t bring myself to think one of those two are the culprit. To my brother, the vase belongs to our house, so he wouldn’t have a reason to steal it. Kondou-san’s a person who’s looked after the house’s artwork for close to thirty years, and I can’t think he’d do anything that terrible. And more than anything, if he didn’t say it, no one could have noticed that the vase was switched out, so it would be downright bizarre if he was the one who took off with it.”

Yuzuki seemed quite pressed for words. And from there, he sternly raised his head.

“But thinking back, in that space of a month, there was a chance for someone besides the two. Just one chance to swap out the case. And the number of people who could have done it... there are three.”

Like that, Yuzuki began talking about the incident.

Part 3

"The chance to switch out the pot was on the day Ushijima-san visited our house."

As he spoke, Yuzuki seemed nervous, and regardless of whether the air conditioning was functional, his pale face dripped sweat. He flapped his white shirt to send some air to his skin. Chizuru averted his eyes. But even his eyes away, he had a feeling the boy across the table was letting off a good scent for some reason or another.

"Ushijima-san first called a month and a week ago."

"That's quite precise."

"It just happened to be the day Kondou-san came for his maintenance. Me, my brother, Wakamatsu-san, and Sazanami-san— the four of us were sipping tea in the living room when Kondou-san came over... and it was right around that time that a call came from Ushijima-san. She wanted to, 'Borrow one of our art pieces'. Apparently, she had already got permission from our parents overseas. As I recall, she wanted it for an exhibition on some potter at the Yumoto Modern Art Museum. Ah, by the way, the vase she borrowed was a different vase."

"I see... the day Kondou-san came means that was the last day it was confirmed there was nothing strange with the vase."

"That's correct. So three weeks later... that would be two weeks ago... Ushijima-san came over. It was evening, a weekday. My brother unlocked the storage around twenty minutes before she came. We had to ventilate the place. That day was partly-cloudy without any wind, so even if we left the door open, it didn't seem like it would have any bad effects on the art pieces."

"I see. So for those twenty minutes, the storage was..."

"Unoccupied. Besides me and my brother, Wakamatsu-san was at the house. So it would be possible for her to have committed the offense."

"That so. Anyways, Ushijima-san came over."

"Yes, once she arrived, we guided her straight from the gate to the storage. You

can get there from outdoors. The reason she suddenly wanted to go to the storage was because, ‘It seems that storehouse is filled with all sorts of rare articles, so I’d like to see it by all means,’ she said. She was looking around on her own for around ten minutes. So as not to rush her, my brother and I were waiting outside.”

Meaning that moment was Ushijima’s chance.

“Yeah, yeah. And then?”

“And then Ushijima-san entered the main house from the main entrance and had some of Wakamatsu-san’s tea in the living room. It was around then that Sazanami-san came. He doesn’t have a key, so he has to ring up the intercom. Right around when Ushijima-san said, ‘I’m glad I got to see so many rare articles,’ he dropped by the living room for a moment and gave his greetings, before going off for his regular work to prune the garden. Sazanami-san works at his own pace.”

“At that time, the storage was still...”

“It was still open. Ah, but not to the outside. Our wall’s too tall to climb over, and we have a contract with a security company, so even if you get over, a buzzer will sound. Unless you ring the bell at the gate, or use a key, it’s definitely impossible to enter the premise. So that’s why we let our guard down and left the storage open...”

“When was the storage locked up?”

“Um, after a document was signed with Ushijima-san in the living room. After that, my brother, Ushijima-san and I went over to the storage, we surrendered the vase to her... I’ve said it a few times now, but it was a different vase than the one that was swapped out... and with it in her hands, Ushijima-san went home. At that time we were watching all the way, and our business ended in three minutes, so it would be impossible to switch it out there.

By the way, after Ushijima-san saw the storehouse, Wakamatsu-san was with us in the living room the whole time, so any further swaps would be impossible.”

In his head, Chizuru put all the information he’d gained in order. There, he could see a single path.

“... Meaning before Ushijima-san came, Wakamatsu-san could have swapped it. Once Ushijima-san was here, she could swap it in the ten minutes she looked

around the storehouse. And Sazanami-san who came later could have swapped it. It's those three choices."

"That's right!"

"Then I'll ask you six questions."

Chizuru opened his right hand, and tapped the index finger of his left against it. He put tension onto Yuzuki's girly face.

"Alright."

"One. When Ushijima-san entered the storage, what sort of bag did she have? Meaning, would she be able to conceal a vase?"

"Yes. From the start, she had come to borrow a different vase, so she had a duralumin case for transport purposes. I was there at the end when she got the vase she was looking for, but I didn't look inside her suitcase."

"I see. Then two. The vases inside the storage, are they all locked up individually?"

"No, they're out in the open. Otherwise, no one would have been able to swap them out."

"Quite right. Then three. Did Ushijima-san know Kondou-san came over every month to maintain the artwork?"

"? ... Yes. To an extent that when she first called, she even asked permission from Kondou-san who was on the site. The fact that 'A specialist comes to look after the pottery at regular intervals,' is something Ushijima-san should know."

"Then question number four. When are your parents scheduled to return from overseas?"

"Uuh...? U-um... for now, they won't be returning at all in the next year, I heard. Their official assignment will take another three years."

"Question five. Who knew that fact?"

"Of course me and my brother. Also Wakamatsu-san and Sazanami-san. Kondou-san knew as well."

"... OK. Then final question. It's a terrible question, but with this I'll know everything, so please forgive me. To put it bluntly, do you think there's any possibility your brother Tsukioka Kansuke-san is the culprit?"

Yuzuki's feminine eyebrows drew closer in worry.

"... Hmm, I really don't think so Nii-cha... My brother doesn't have a motive.

He's not troubled for money, and he hasn't fought with my parents at all lately."

"I see, thank you. I know the culprit."

"Ah, is that so. Hooray, as expected of Chizuru-senpa... eh?"

Yuzuki's wide eyes opened even wider as he looked at Chizuru's face in shock.

"Eh? Eh? Y-you know the culprit... is that true?"

"Yeah. I told you I'd solve it in an instant, didn't I? I didn't even have to see the scene."

"No, but I mean... from just talking to me? Then who is the culprit?"

"That would be..."

At that moment, the living room door opened, and a single individual came in. A face chizuru hadn't seen before. Faint white hair, and round scholarly glasses, an old man of stout build. Regardless of the day's heat, he wore a deep green sweater. From his age, he was likely the conservator Kondou.

"Oh, Yusuki. Is that person your friend?"

In a gentle voice that seemed overly good natured, the elder asked.

"Yes. Chizuru-senpai, this person is Kondou-san... Kondou-san, thank you for your work. Are you done with the storehouse?"

"Just finished up now. So I was looking around for Kansuke-san, but do you know where he is?"

"Yeah, he's talking with the person from the insurance company in the receptions room. Do you need something?"

"Well the key to the storage, you see. It's wide open right now. We've got to lock it tight to make sure something like that doesn't happen again. But Kansuke-san left with the key..."

"Ah, nii-chan can be an airhead when it comes to these sorts of things... then should I go get him?"

"Yeah. Well, it's just getting the key, so I doubt it will be any trouble to that insurance company person."

So Yuzuki followed Kondou, and Chizuru left the room as well. Yuzuki knocked at the receptions room beside the living room. But there was no response.

"I'm coming in, nii-chan... huh?"

At the room's sofa set, the form of Tsukioka KKansuka and Kuragano of the insurance company were nowhere to be found.

"Where could they have gone."

As if to overlap with Yuzuki's mutter.

"UWAAAAAAAAAAH!!"

A scream resounded out. The three looked into one another's faces.

"T-that scream was...?"

Old Kondou shrunk his body in fear, looking around nervously.

"I don't know," worried Yuzuki, man of the house, "That sounded like a man's voice, but... could it be nii-chan!? Hey, Chizuru-senpai, what do we do?"

Yuzuki impatiently pulled at the sleeve of Chizuru's hoodie. Chizuru was also perturbed by the sudden occurrence.

"The voice echoed... couldn't it have come from the storage?"

"Let's go!!"

Yuzuki started pulling the sleeve more forcefully.

As they raced ahead, there were some signs the old man Kondou was frantically trying to keep up. To be honest, Chizuru didn't want to burst into a sprint, but there was a time and place for that.

Following Yuzuki, he raced down the path that ran a straight line from the entranceway. To where Chizuru had just used a restroom, they took a left and ran some more. Behind, they could hear the sound of a number of doors opening. Everyone had noticed the noise. At the end of their sprint was a sliding door that led outside. Opening it, Chizuru found the passage he'd seen before that connected to the storage. A distance of around thirty meters was quickly closed by swift feet.

The closed door of the storage was wide open. It wasn't locked.

"... Aaah!"

A pool of blood spread along the ground. The shattered fragments of a vase. In its center, that collapsed small body belonged to Sazanami the gardener.

"S-Sazanami-san!

Yuzuki cried out and rushed over. Chizuru also kneeled by Sazanami's side and took his pulse.

"He has a pulse... looks like he hit his head. We have to call an ambulance. Do you have a cellphone on you?"

"Y-y-yes."

Yuzuki was flustered to a pitiable extent, tears building up in his eyes. His shaking hands produced a smart phone from his pocket and operated it. But from his panic, he ended up dropping it in the blood.

"Don't worry. I'll do it."

Lifting up Yuzuki's phone from the blood, Chizuru opened the emergency dialer, and inputted 119.

"... Yes, it's an emergency. The location is Yumoto City..."

With a backward glance at the teary Yuzuki watching over him, Chizuru followed the emergency personnel's orders to give Sazanami first aid to the greatest extent possible.

By the time Chizuru urged them to send someone at once and ended the call, Kondou, Wakamatsu and Kansuke rushed in from the connecting passage.

"Whose scream was that?"

"What happened?"

"Yuzuki! Chizuru-kun! What is going on!?"

Three mouths asked. Chizuru spoke faster than usual... than his usual... "Sazanami-san the gardener is bleeding from the head, and has collapsed. I've taken emergency measures by the responder's instructions, so we should just have two people watch over him until they come. Also, Wakamatsu-san. in case someone needs to vomit, do you have a plastic bag or something?"

When the dazed housekeeper's name was called, she suddenly stiffened her body, neglecting to give a reply as she ran off.

"Um... what's this ruckus?"

Passing Wakamatsu by, Ushijima the curator walked down the passage to the storehouse. This time, Kansuke explained the situation.

“... That can’t be! In this storehouse?”

“Aah!” Kondou-san cried as he peered in. “A pot has been broken!? As I recall, that one was made in nineteen fifty five by the great...”

“Eeh? No way!”

“Kondou-san, Ushijima-san!” Yuzuki turned severe, “Right now, rather than some pot, isn’t Sazanami’san’s condition more drastic!? We have to look over him.”

“... Yuzuki, Chizuru-kun.”

Kansuke gazed at the two.

“You’re both covered in blood. Go change.”

“... Ah.”

Yuzuki and Chizuru looked at once another. As they kneeled to treat the gardener and make a call, they had gotten his blood all over them.

“Now leave this place to us.”

Pushing their backs, Kansuke sent them towards the bath. The bath was right at the end of the passage, you could get there by walking along the veranda. Without returning to the inside of the main building, by following the deck to the left side of the sliding door, they certainly did find themselves at the bath. Standing in front of the bathroom, Chizuru looked back in the direction of the storehouse. But it wasn’t visible from where they stood.

They entered the building through the glass door.

Once they were alone in the dressing room, Yuzuki lowered his head to Chizuru.

“Thank you for back there. Since I was so flustered you had to follow through for me.”

Chizuru waved his hand as if it were nothing.

“Anyone would be surprised, normally. For me, well, it’s my second time.”

“Ah, that’s right. Even so, that was scary. My heart is still racing.”

To shake off his fright, Yuzuki discarded his bloodstained shirt. His pale chest exposed, Chizuru was troubled over where to look as he took off his own bloody hoody. Why are you so flustered? Yuzuki is a boy, Yuzuki is a boy, he reminded himself.

... It was a good thing Ageha wasn't there. In various ways.
That thought in his heart, Chizuru threw off his hoodie.

Part 4

“How’s the victim’s condition?”

At Inspector Ibusuki’s enquiry, Assistant Inspector Atami hastily flipped through his notebook.

“Still unconscious. He suffered terrible laceration on his head.”

“Right... oy, Atami!”

“Y-yes!”

“Your feet! You’re stepping on pottery fragments.”

“Uwah! You’re right, I’m sorry.”

Inspector Ibusuki’s sculpture-like face grimaced, “Good grief, just how many times do you plan on doing this...” she leaked a small voice. From there, she turned a circle to look around the storage.

Having received a report of an incident resulting in injury, the two had come as part of the investigations team. Upon stepping onto the scene, the first things to confuse them were the pottery fragments scattered around, and looking around the storehouse as a whole, the large loads of ancient artworks to fill the space took them by surprise. According to the house’s resident who guided them there—Tsukioka Kansuke—the owner of the house, his parents, worked with old pieces of art.

“Ibusuki-san.”

The forensics member with her hair in braids... Shirahama Yayoi called over to Ibusuki.

“Could I gather up these pottery fragments already? We’ve already finished photographing the area.”

Ibusuki gave a light nod.

“Yes, your right. That will make it much easier for us to move. I’ll leave it to you.”

“Also, besides that, we still have to dust for prints, so... you’ll have to wait about

another twenty minutes for the complete investigation of this storehouse.” “Understood. In that timeframe, we’ll hear out the suspects... Oy, quit spacing out, Atami. We’re going.” “Y-yes.”

Driven away with a low voice, Atami went forth almost as if tumbling over. Able to gallantly pull off a suit and trousers, Ibusuki’s almond eyes looked as if they could intimidate anyone with a glance. While a young woman, if mishandled, she could be several times scarier than any middle-aged male boss around. No, she was already plenty scary, and Atami spat out a sigh in his heart. The detectives left the forensics team behind and exited the storage. Passing across the outdoor passage on the way back inside, Ibusuki and Atami were stopped in their tracks by a single voice.

“... You’re not going to investigate that passageway?”

They stiffened. Atami felt a bad premonition at that familiar voice as he turned to see a familiar face.

Long bangs to lightly cover his right eye, and the drowsy double-eyelid that peeked out from beneath. That eye that watched the two detectives belonged to Kirishima Chizuru.

“C-Chizuru-kun!?”

Atami let out a befuddled cry. And with unsteady steps back, he collided into Ibusuki. Ibusuki irritatedly moved him to one side, leaning his body against one of the roof support pillars on the walkway’s edge before wandering over to Chizuru. She was the one of higher stature, so it ended up as her looking down over him.

With an over-sized hoodie slovenly leapt open in the front, he sent the female detective a faint smile. Ibusuki looked at him, a wrinkle gracing her brow.

“... What are you doing, Kirishima Chizuru?”
“What I’m... at what level do you want to ask that question? If it’s at an elementary school level, I’d answer ‘I’m breathing’.”

Angered at his answer to belittle his opponent, she drew closer with momentum just short of grasping him.

“You know that’s not the answer I want! Why are you at the house that

because a scene of a crime!?”

“Is it so strange for an upperclassman to be at the house of his junior?”

Chizuru pointed his finger a bit to the side.

There was a person there. From their small stature, they had been perfectly concealed in Chisuru’s shadow.

“I came here at the invitation of this house’s resident, Tsukioka Yuzuki, I did.”

“... He did.”

To signal the affirmative, Yuzuki repeated after him.

Mildly flustered, Ibusuki looked over Yuzuki from head to toe. A white hoodie that matched Chizuru’s and baggy jeans, Yusuki looked ticklish under Ibusuki’s gaze.

“Looks like you’re with a different one than you were with last time.”

“Are you talking about Ageha? She should be in cram school right around now.”

“I see... hmm, despite your appearance, looks like you’re lacking in integrity.”

“What?”

Ibusuki waved her chin towards Yuzuki. Yuzuki gave a few confused blinks. The ends of his eyelashes—so long they might make sound in the motion—quivered. It seems he was afraid of the detective.

“So this kid is your girlfriend. Hmph, good grief, you high schoolers these days.”

“It seems you are under a large misunderstanding, Chizuru lightly poked Yuzuki’s upper arm, “This is a boy.”

Ibusuki locked eyes with Atami. From there, she looked over Yuzuki once more with tremendous force.

“... That’s not a very funny joke.”

“Chizuru-kun, even if you’re trying to play it off, I don’t think that was enough of an excuse.”

On Ibusuki and Atami’s words, Yuzuki spoke apologetically.

“... No, I’m a boy,” he said.

The two detectives looked at one another again.

"I can't believe that..."

Ibusuki looked Yuzuki over again. "It's true," Yuzuki tried to emphasize.

"More importantly, Officer Ibusuki," Chizuru pointed at the passage, "You sure you don't have to investigate that?"

"For what?"

"Perhaps there's an important lead lying around. On this passageway."

Ibusuki clicked her tongue.

"You don't have any qualifications to stick your moth into our investigation. Even if you're the chief of our criminal affairs department's son... rather, why are the two of you here? I recall Tsukioka saying he'd gather all relevant personnel in the living room."

"Oh, we slipped out of that," Chizuru said calmly, "because I'm sure we'll be useful."

"I see, that's quite something."

Ibusuki's eyebrows twitched, "But how unfortunate. There's nothing for you to assist in... now! Let's all go to the living room."

She walked towards the door in indignation, speaking with her back to the three.

"... It doesn't matter to me whether you're our chief's son or not. Based on how things go, I'll take you into police custody if I have to."

"I'm well aware."

Ibusuki irritably entered the building alone, leaving with loud footsteps.

"... Chizuru-kun," Atami tiredly scratched his hair, "Please don't get Ibusuki-san too angry. It'll shift over to me."

"Do the two of you know each other?"

To Yuzuki's question, Chizuru nodded, 'Ja'.

"From that previous incident... more importantly, Officer Atami. Let's get back quickly."

"Ah! That's right. You have a point! Anyways, Chizuru-kun, please don't do anything unnecessary."

"I won't. And there's no point in doing it anyways. I already know the culprit."

While he was on the verge of returning inside, Atami slipped and fell.

“What!? That’s fast, Chizuru-kun! Isn’t that way too fast!?”

Yuzuki was also making a bewildered face, nodding ‘oh I see,’ in assent.

“You did say you knew the culprit behind the swapping of the vase.”

“Vase? Swap?”

Unable to grasp the situation, Atami’s eyes were spinning.

Taking a sidelong glance at him, Chizuru spoke in a tone full of implications.

“... But even if I say I know the culprit, I don’t have anything decisive yet. Some absolute evidence that could silence their excuses. So there’s something I want you to cooperate with me on, Officer Atami.”

“W-what is it? Am I supposed to be your gofer?”

“Does that really sound so bad? Whatever the case, until you catch another nine culprits, you’ll be Ibusuki-san’s gofer anyways.”

“Did you really have to go there...”

“Are you listening, Officer Atami? What I want you to do is really simple. It’s...”



After hearing the gist of the theft incident from Tsukioka Kansuke in the receptions room, Officer Ibusuki entered the living room. There, those involved with the case were already assembled.

Apart from Officer Atami, Kirishima Chizuru and Tsukioka Yuzuki who had reached beforehand, the remaining four were members she was seeing for the first time.

From Kansuke’s descriptions of their ages, she had a general idea of who was who.

The apron-wearing woman in her forties was the housekeeper Wakamatsu Megumi.

The older man in the deep-green sweater was the conservator Kondou Bunji. The young woman with the round glasses and fluffy hair was the curator of the Yumoto Museum of Modern Art, Ushijima Miho.

And the middle-aged man with silver-rimmed glasses was likely the insurance investigator Kuragano Ryou.

“I’ve kept you waiting.”

"Um, detective?"

As Ibusuki offered a light apology, the first to call over was Kondou. He was huddled to make his small, aged body even smaller, anxiously tampering with the sleeves of his clothing.

"How's Sazanami-san's condition?"

"I can't say anything about that point," said Ibusuki in a frank tone, "But it seems he's in quite a dangerous condition... for now, we must do whatever we're capable of. Meaning whatever we can do to lead this case to its resolution."

With those words, Ibusuki linked her hands over the table.

"First let's put in order the events of this incident. It all started with the swapping of a vase in this house. The situation is one where I can only think the culprit is among those gathered here."

"I'd ask you keep the records a bit more precise," Kuragano refuted. "I only moved once the vase had already been taken from the storehouse. The only reason I came here today was from my position as a single investigator. So shouldn't I be omitted from that?"

His overbearing tone irritated Ibusuki.

"Well anyways, just hear me out. So the culprit is among us... let's just proceed the story under that assumption. This time's attack of the gardener Sazanami Tarou was clearly related to the swapping of the vase. There are two reasons I can say this... the broken vase strewn across the storehouse floor. And on the warehouse desk, the other vase placed away from where it would usually be on display..."

"What do you mean by that?"

Ushijima raised her hand, and gave a reserved question.
Ibusuki didn't answer is, instead going on, "... After the victim was found, how many among you approached the body?"

"Me and Yuzuki approached it," Chizuru replied without looking at Ibusuki. "We discovered the body, and called for an ambulance."

"... Anyone else?"

Ibusuki forcefully took her eyes off of Bhisuru as she asked.

Kansuke raised his hand, "After Chizuru and Yuzuki left the storage, I looked after Sazanami-san. And after Wakamatsu-san returned with a plastic bag and some wet towels, and we watched over him together."

Wakamatsu nodded the affirmative.

"I see. Then it's just you four... no, what I wanted to ask was whether Kondou-san or Ushijima-san approached the crime scene."

"W-what's with that!?"

His face losing its color, Kondou stood, "You mean to say either me or Ushijima-san is the culprit!?"

"T-that can't..."

Ushijima's eyebrows wilted in sorrow.

"Calm down, that's not what I meant." Ibusuki raised both her hands to soothe them.

"What's important is whether our two experts were able to get a good look at the ceramic fragments scattered around the scene... is what I wanted to know."

"I don't get it," Kuragano cut himself in, "The point of your question. Just what are you trying to suggest?"

"To speak from conclusions, either the broken vase at the scene, or the one moved from its place is thought to be fake... meaning another switching of pieces was about to take place."

Everyone in the living room raised a stir. To be more precise, Chizuru alone kept nodding saying, yeah, yeah, I know.

"A-a switching?"

"That's right, Ushijima-san. In this house, two weeks ago, an expensive vase was switched out for a cheap imposter by somebody's hand."

"Two weeks ago? You mean when I came by!? I'm not the culprit."

"Calm down for now... anyways, another swapping of vases was to take place today. That's how it is. Meaning..."

"Meaning what you want to say," Kuragano swiped up her words, "Is that the criminal made a second appearance, and snuck into the storehouse. And they tried to replace one of the vases. But the gardener Sazanami noticed them, so the bandit silenced his mouth... is that what this is?"

"That's how it is. Probably... so Kondou-san and Ushijima-san, with your positions as conservator and curator, I thought you would be knowledgeable on vases, to an extent. If either of you had looked upon the scene, I thought you'd be able to say which one was real."

The experienced appraiser Kondou vexingly scratched his light white hair.

"No, I did take a glimpse at the scene, but I only saw the broken vase... it was dark and I'm nearsighted, and more than anything, it was broken. It would be difficult to call it a vase at all. Unless I looked at it as a whole, I don't think I'd be able to tell it apart."

Ushijima-san nodded agreement at Kondou's words.

"... I see. Then I'll have the forensics team bring the vase and fragments in, so let's have you see which one is real."

Sending Atami running, she had him bring Shirahama the forensics investigator back with him.

"I'm sorry, Shirahama-san. When you still have things to investigate."

"Oh, don't mind it, I had just finished up. I was almost about to make my way here anyways."

Shirahama smiled, "... So why did you want me to bring the vase?"

"Ah!" Kondou looked at the vase in Shirahama's hands and cried out. "T-that vase! Put it on the table a moment and let me get a better look."

"O-kay"

Kondou and Ushijima leaned in towards the table, staring intently at the vase.

"... It's real."

"That it is."

The two experts nodded amongst themselves. Ibusuki shook her chin towards Shirahama, having her place the plastic bag of fragments on the table.

"... This is..."

After staring it a while, Kondou's drive was gone. Locking eyes with Ushijima, "... This is a sham."

“... Okay, that’s one matter resolved.”

Ibusuki put her hands together.

“The broken one is a counterfeit, and the real one was safe...”

“This vase doesn’t have much blood on it.”

Yumoto looked at the vase fragments in wonder.

“If he was hit by this, I mean.”

“No, this wasn’t what hit him.”

Atami added in a remark.

“The victim Sazanami-san’s head was smacked hard against a corner of the display case. There was a bloodstain found on it. I’m sure he got into a tussle with the culprit. The small bits of blood on the vase must have come after he collapsed and his blood was flowing.”

“... Anyways!” Ibusuki declared. “As this house has a contract with a security company, entry from the outside wouldn’t be permitted. So the culprit is definitely in this room.”

“... T-that can’t be...”

Ushijima looked as if she would cry.

“According to Tsukioka Kansuke, when the incident took place and he heard a scream, leaving a few out a majority of you were moving independently... so we must make clear everyone’s movements at the time of the crime. Please cooperate with police questioning. First, well let’s see. I heard a bit from you already, so let’s start with Tsukioka Kansuke.”

“... Understood.”

“Oy, we’re going Atami!”

“... Okay!”

Right before he left the room, Atami locked eyes with Chizuru. Chizuru made an undaunted smile.

What he had requested in the passageway.

... What I want from you... during questioning, I want you to make it so I can hear the contents as well.

To Chizuru’s words, Atami offered a sudden rebuttal.

... Don't be stupid! There's no way I could let information leak so easily.

... But if I hear the testimony of the suspects, I can definitely find my evidence. I mean, I already know the culprit.

Atami insisted, then tell me who it is already, but Chizuru declined saying couldn't quite do that yet.

Since it had come to that, there was only one thing Atami could do. Earnestly hear Chizuru out. In that last incident, he had gained assurance of his deduction prowess.

Entering the receptions room, Ibusuki and Atami sat across from Tsukioka Kansuke.

Once the questioning began, Atami operated his cellphone in his pocket, and made a call to Chizuru.

Part 5

“Let’s get the flow of this case in order.”

Officer Ibusuki looked Tsukioka Kansuke in the eye as she spoke. Perhaps nervous, sweat flowed down his muscular body. And the glance he sent over remained wary of both Ibusuki and Atami.

“Sazanami-san the gardener was attacked by someone, and raised a scream. Hearing that, your younger brother Yuzuki-kun, and his senior at school Kirishima Chizuru discovered Sazanami-san in critical condition. That’s how it is.”

“... Yes. That’s how it is.”

“Then let me ask. When you heard Sazanami-san’s scream, where exactly were you?”



Chizuru and Yuzuki were making themselves scarce in the restroom, listening in on the questioning.

The sound through the phone in detective Atami’s pocket was mixed with a bit of rustling.

“... I somehow get the feeling we’re doing something we shouldn’t be.”

So his voice didn’t reach the other end of the line, Yuzuki whispered.

“Yeah, well...” Chizuru used the same thin voice as always, “That’s because we are.”

‘When I heard Sazanami-san’s scream, is it? Umm, back then I was...’

Across the phone, they could hear Kansuke’s answer.

“As I recall, nii-chan and the guy from the insurance company weren’t in the receptions room.”

“That’s right.”

‘At that time, the insurance inspector Kuragano-san went to use the

restroom.'

'I see,' came Ibusuki's sharp voice. 'And what about you?'

'I thought it was about the right time, so I went to see Ushijima-san in the reference room. Kuragano-san's enquiry seemed it was going to take quite a while, so I went to tell her to wait a while longer.'

'Did you meet her?'

'I entered the reference room, but she wasn't there. Besides some pieces of art, the reference room also has a few bookshelves, and it's considerably large... so when I was searching around it, the scream came. I went out to the hall right in time to see Chizuru and Yuzuki running off... also, Kondou-san was following behind them.'



"Ushijima-san. Why did you come here today?"

Once Kansuke's questioning was over, next came the curator of the Yumoto Modern Art Museum, Ushijima Miho.

Ushijima anxiously corrected the positioning of her round glasses.

"I came to return a vase. I borrowed it two weeks ago to display in an exhibition... ah, it's a different vase than the one that became a problem in this incident."

"I see. And where is that vase firth now?"

"I left it in the reference room. When I heard the scream and raced over, I didn't have the mind to go back and get it."

"I see... now then, where were you during Tsukioka Kansuke-san's meeting with Kuragano-san?"

"As I was telling you, in the reference room. While it doesn't have anything as valuable as in the storage, There are plenty of rare items from the Tsukioka Collection. It was quite a worthwhile time spent."

"But when you heard the scream, you were not in the reference room."

"Y-yes, that's right. I'm surprised you knew."

"Tsukioka Kansuke-san had just come to the reference room to speak with you... so where were you?"

"The bathroom."

"Bathroom? That should have been in use by the Insurance Agent Kuragano-

san.”

“This house has a separate men’s and woman’s room.”



Listening in on the conversation, Chizuru couldn’t help but ask Yuzuki.

“The bathroom’s gender-separated?”

“Yeah. Wait, didn’t you use the restroom too?”

“I did, but... I just went exactly where you told me to.”

“Oh, right. The ladies room is a little closer to the outdoor passage.”

“I see.”

“... Seems it’s Kuragano-san’s turn next.”



“Kuragano Ryou-san, why did you come by the house today?”

“For work. I had to investigate the vase that was swapped out. Whether it fell under insurance coverage or not... we had a need to determine it.”

The high strung insurance agent of silver-rimmed glasses tapped his finger against the table as he spoke.

“So I had to hear out the son of the owner— Tsukioka Kansuke— and find out what happened. At first I thought it was some malicious scam, but taking today’s incident into account, it does seem there really was a theft.”

“That does seem to be the case... by the way, when you heard the scream, you were away from your seat in your discussion with Tsukioka Kansuke-san, were you not?”

“Right, I was in the bathroom.”

“When you heard the scream, what did you do?”

“I’d like you to forgive me for saying something dirty, but when I heard the sound, I was in the middle of business. So I looked out the window towards the storage. That boy called Kirishima and the girl called Yusuki were running down the passage.”

“... Tsukioka Yuzuki is a boy.”

Atami softly corrected him. Kuragano’s eyes opened wide.

“R-really...? It’s hard to believe it from those looks...”

“Yes, I thought the same. But it does seem he is a boy.”

“... He’s a resident of this house, thought. It seems you aren’t very knowledgeable about this place.”

To Ibusuki’s question, Kuragano gave a sullen nod.

“It’s the first time I’ve ever been to this house. And I’m here on business, so I’ve no need to dig into my client’s private matters.”



“... So Kuragano-san thought I was a girl.”

Yuzuki seemed dispirited.

“Yeah, well there’s really no helping it... come to think of it, that bathroom looks over the passage.”

“Yeah, it does,” Chizuru nodded., “I used that bathroom too, and you definitely can see the passageway from there.”

“... Oh, looks like Kondou-san’s next.”



“Now then, Kondou-san. You went to the storehouse to look after the art pieces you failed to work on a week ago... is that right?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

An enervated expression floated across Kondou Bunji’s aged face. In fear, he watched Ibusuki with upturned eyes.

“After the maintenance was over, I went looking for Kansuke-san so he could lock up... I never thought a bandit would use that instant to sneak in.”

“When you heard the scream, where were you?”

“In the living room with young Yuzuki. I met that Chizuru kid, and we all went to the receptions room to get Kansuke-san. He wasn’t there, though.”

“I see. Meaning when you heard the scream, you were with the two high school students?”

“That’s right. So I’m irrelevant to this case!”

“... That’s something we’ll be deciding.”



“Kondou-san’s innocent, isn’t he? I mean, just like he said, at that time he was together with us.”

Chizuru nodded.

“Well, you’re right about that... finally we have Wakamatsu-san.”



“Wakamatsu-san. When you heard the scream, where were you?”

Wakamatsu Megumi the Housekeeper answered without much a change in expression.

“Yes. At the time, I had finished taking in the laundry, and I was in the middle of folding it. In the Japanese room.”

“Japanese room? Where is that?”

“At a former of the corridor that leads to the passage. I heard the scream, and when I was in a daze over what it could be, I heard the sound of people running, so I gave chase as well. When I got to the detached storage, I saw Sazanami-san in such a state...”



“Yeah. There was nothing strange about Wakamatsu-san’s testimony, right?”

“That’s right,” from there, Chizuru cut off his connection with Atami, “More importantly, let’s get back. We’ve been putting off Officer Atami for a while, but it’s finally our turn.”



The police questioning ended with Yuzuki, then Chizuru.

“... That’s everything. You can go now.”

Ibusuki waved her hand as if to brush Chizuru away. Chizuru stood as he sent her a glance.

“Did you identify the culprit?”

“I have no obligation to tell you. Seriously, cut it out already!”

“So you don’t know yet? Did you investigate the items littered around the scene?”

Ibusuki furrowed her brow.

“The fragments of the vase? Our forensics team examined them thoroughly.”
“Not that. Whether there was anything else around or not, I think it’s best you go ask your forensics people. Well then.”

Leaving some cryptic words, Chizuru left the room.

Ibusuki sent him off with a loathsome glare before turning those hate-filled eyes towards Atami.

“Oy, about the items that had fallen at the scene! Was there anything besides the vase?”

“Eh!? Um... uh...” Atami flipped his way through the documents. They had just come in from the forensics team’s Shirahama Yayoi. “Um... ah, here we are! A cell phone. According to Shirahama-san’s report, ‘the victim’s bag that had been nearby was kicked over, and it fell from inside’... she wrote.”

Ibusuki was lost in deep thought. After a while of that, she sent a glance to Atami.

“Do you understand what that means?”

“Eh? ... Nope, not in the slightest.”

“I’ll bet. Even I’m not certain.”

Ibusuki stood from her seat and left the receptions room. Atami hurriedly followed behind.

Entering the living room next door, Ibusuki declared to the members gathered.

“Today’s investigations are over. We may call you in for more discussion at a latter date. Well then... hmm?”

Ibusuki furrowed her brow.

“I don’t see Kirishima Chizuru or Tsukioka Yuzuki.”

“Oh, if you want my brother and Chizuru-kun,” Kansuke sounded apologetic, “They left not but a moment ago.”

“Left? To where!?”

Ibusuki unintentionally raised her voice.

“T-the convenience store, he said.”

Ushijima Miho answered. “That Chizuru kid said, ‘It’s hot, so I want some ice cream,’ and pulled Yuzuki-kun out.”

“What is he, five!!?”

Ibusuki clicked her tongue hard, and scratched her shord hair.

At that moment, a call came to Atami’s phone. Atami left the room to answer.

‘Officer Atami, been a while.’

“I-is this Chizuru-kun?” Atami lowered his voice, “That’s no good you know, you can’t just go out on your own! Where are you now?”

‘The restroom of a convenience store... more importantly, how is Ibusuki-san doing? Does she know who the culprit is?’

“Doesn’t have a clue, it seems. Of course, neither do I.”

‘Is that so. By the way, do you want to know the truth of this case?’

“... Of course I do.”

‘Really now. I know the culprit. I mean, we got some decisive evidence in that questioning.’

“Tell me.”

‘...’

“.....”

‘.....’

“Haaah,” beaten down, Atami took a long sigh. “Got it, I have to pay you, right? But the deal’s the same as before, and if your reasoning’s too far from the mark, you’re not getting anything. Ah, and also, just as you promised last time, you’re properly giving me a generous discount from fifty thousand yen, aren’t you?”

‘Of course. Now then, I’ll email you, so could you tell me your address?’

After giving his address, Atami insisted Chizuru, “Get back soon,” before cutting the call.

He pushed his back against the wall, and took an even bigger sigh. There, a mail came in.

“He’s fast...”

Atami opened up the email. And he scrolled down the screen to read through it.

His hand stopped halfway thought.

“What was that? That can’t be...”

He almost let go of the phone. The name Chizuru identified as the thief was much too unexpected to the detective.

Answer

Part 1

When Officer Atami returned to the living room, all the eyes present gathered on him.

“That was quite a long call.”

Said Officer Ibusuki, scowling at him. I’m sorry, he apologized before turning back to the suspects.

The culprit who inflicted such a severe wound to the house’s gardener Sazanami Tarou was using an innocent façade to blend in with the others. Atami made sure not to concentrate his gaze on them too much as he approached the table everyone had gathered at.

“Everyone, I have something I must say.”

At Atami’s utterance, Ibusuki raised her eyebrows. What’s this all of a sudden, her face seemed to say. To seal off her objections, Atami went into his next words.

“I have just now understood the truth of the incident that took place in this house. I’d like you to hear it out.”

“Eeeh!? Have you really, officer?”

Ushijima Miho’s eyes opened wide behind her glasses.

“Just who could have swapped out that vase?”

Kondou Bunji the conservator drew close to him. And then as if to correct himself, “No of course Sazanami-san’s injuries are also important,” he added on.

“First, let’s get the vase swapping event that occurred in this house in order.”

As Atami started off, Ibusuki gave an irritated, “Oy...” in a quiet voice to stop him, but she had no words to follow. It seems she also wanted to hear how

Atami had arrived at his truth.

“A week from today, during the regular art maintenance, Kondou-san noticed the swapping of the vase. Meaning one of the valuable pieces stored in the storage had been switched for a cheap counterfeit.”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

Kondou spoke in a withered voice.

“Then when was that vase switched out? In the appraisal just a month before, the vase was definitely real. In that case, there were only two with an opportunity to swap it. Either Tsukioka Kansuke-san who always kept the key with him, or...”

As Atami looked at Kansuke, his muscular body stiffened and his face went tense.

“The one who proclaimed it had been swapped in the first place, Kondou-san.”

“O-oy, sir. Wait just a minute there.”

Kondou stood timidly, but Atami raised both his hands to calm him.

“Calm down. Calling the two of you suspects is nothing special... for you’re just an addition to the other three suspects. Ushijima-san stopped by this house, and on that day came another chance to swap it out.”

Her name called out, Ushijima Miho’s body twitched.

It seems Ibusuki’s irritation was rising, “Why are you so knowledgeable on the matter?” she asked. He frantically gave an excuse of, “Oh, well, I saw the investigation reference data, so...”

As the two carried on that exchange, Kuragano Ryou cleared his throat to interrupt. The silver-spectacled insurance agent nervously hit his finger against the table as he spoke.

“Isn’t this a bit long for an introduction? To summarize, there are five suspects. That’s all you’re trying to say, right?”

“R-right, that’s right!”

Taking those words as his life boat, Atami returned to his explanation.

"Ushijima-san came to borrow a vase... a different one than the one switched out... and on that day, there were three people with a chance to carry out the deed. First, Ushijima-san herself, the housekeeper Wakamatsu Megumi-san, and the gardener Sazanami Tarou-san who's currently out from a serious injury."

"I'm sure everyone already knows that. Just get to your deductions already."

Ibusuki spanked him with words. Atami's body tensed as he unraveled the deductions.

Yet those threads of logic weren't his, but Chizuru's.



"All I noticed was the, 'risk of the swap being noticed,' you know."

On the bench in front of the convenience store, Chizuru and Yuzuki sat. He had forcefully dragged along Yuzuki, who'd tried to stop him with words of, that's a terrible idea, and escaped the living room alongside him. And now the sun was falling and the day growing thin; under the light leaking out of the store, the two sat and ate their frozen treats.

"What do you mean by that?"

"The swapped-out vase was noticed by Kondou-san. In his maintenance he carried out every month. If you think about it normally, that makes for two suspects. Because of Ushijima-san's visit two weeks ago, that inflated the number to five."

"That's true."

After answering Chizuru's words, Yuzuki licked his vanilla bar with the tip of his tongue.

"Both you and Kansuke know next to nothing when it comes to ancient art. The owner— your parents— are out of the country right now. In that case, the only one who could have noticed was Kondou-san. Telling a counterfeit from a genuine article is beyond the distinction of an amateur."

"Yes."

"... But there, another specialist comes on the scene. The curator of the Yumoto Museum of Modern Art, Ushijima Miho-san."

"Yeah, come to think of it, she vouched for Kondou-san's appraisal today."

"Right. So try imagining the following scenario. Let's say the culprit who switched out the vases was Kondou-san. And the swap had already taken place in his maintenance the month before...?"

"Ah, then Ushijima would have noticed the fake when she came in later and looked around. She's a specialist, after all."

"Right. Kondou-san knew Ushijima-san was coming beforehand, so I doubt he would swap it out with such a danger of being found out."

"... But what if it was after Ushijima-san came? Meaning he himself switched the vase the day he said 'This vase is a fake'? No, not that I'm doubting his words."

"... But if you think about it, that would be strange. I mean, at that point he was the only one left who could have noticed the change. Your parents aren't coming back for another year. The culprit would probably sell off the stolen vase, but in that case, they'd want to want some time to pass from when it was stolen. In order to contain the risk of anything pointing to them. So even if Kondou-san would profess his own crime, he had no reason to choose the exact moment of the act.

"Couldn't it have been to frame Ushijima-san, who just happened to drop by?""

"He wasn't there on the day Ushijima-san came to this house. He had no way of knowing if she had a chance to swap the vase out or not. If on that day, the storage's key stayed in Kansuke's possession, and there weren't any with a chance to steal it, the suspects would still be Kondou-san and Kansuke-san in the end."

"I see. Then Kondou-san isn't the culprit."

"Right. For the same reason, Ushijima-san isn't the culprit either."

"Why's that?"

Yuzuki stared blankly.

"She knew a specialist like Kondou-san came to look after the pieces at regular intervals."

"T-that's right. When she called, I told her Kondou-san makes regular visits."

"Which means there was no way she would be able to swap it. I mean, she knew Kondou-san would come someday soon and notice the crime had taken place."

"Y-yeah, that's true... But even if the switch was noticed, there's no guarantee

Ushijima-san would be the only suspect.”

“That’s right. But when it comes to the others who were capable of doing it, they’re all limited to those involved with the Tsukioka House. For both Wakamatsu-san and Sazanami-san, while their days in service to your house may not have been long, they’re technically people of the inside. If listed beside them, an outsider knowledgeable on the vase’s value wouldn’t be able to escape the forefront of suspicion. And she had no way of knowing when the swap would be noticed. Is there really anyone who would commit theft under such a high risk?”

“You do have a point there.”

Yuzuki still didn’t seem satisfied. Perhaps he still suspected Ushijima-san, a complete outsider to the house, or so Chizuru couldn’t help but suppose.

“Then let me present another piece of evidence.”

Chizuru swung about the stick of his finished popsicle as he gave his lecture.

“Ushijima-san who dropped by the Tsukioka House was able to see the storehouse on your and your brother’s good will. Isn’t that right?”

Yuzuki licked up the last drip of his ice cream, as he assented.

“But what if she was told she couldn’t look around the storehouse? What if you didn’t let her stay there alone? Such a case wouldn’t be rare by any means. You could even call it rare you left her alone in a storehouse with nothing but valuables for a whole ten minutes.”

“That may be true. But she could have used that coincidence.”

“... Would she have brought along a counterfeit vase to switch out if she was just going to rely on coincidence?”

“... Ah”

“In this incident, the vase wasn’t carried off, it was swapped out. Meaning the culprit would have to prepare a fake vase beforehand. As Ushijima-san didn’t have a grasp on the house’s situation, having her show such deliberate action to bring in a fake is much too unrealistic.”

“I see, you’re right... so it isn’t Ushijima-san after all.”

“Yeah. Now then, next let’s think about your big brother, about Tsukioka Kansuke. He has the key to the storehouse, so he could have swapped vases all

he wanted... but if you call him the culprit, the motive for the crime disappears entirely. Because he is a member of the house that faced a loss. It seems his relationship with the owners— your parents— was favorable enough. Insurance agent Kuragano-san ran his mouth on something like fraud, but to be blunt, that's impossible.”

“W-why do you say that? I do believe in my brother, but I don't think you've given any evidence to rule him out.”

As Yuzuki pouted, Chizuru lightly tapped against his arm.

“If he wanted to commit insurance fraud, he wouldn't go out of his way to leave a fake behind. Normally, he'd just have to make it look like a theft. In the first place, it's because of that fake vase that an insurance agent had to come over to see, ‘if a theft even took place at all’. Without any reason, he created a danger of the existence of the incident being overlooked in itself. There's no way he put up a charade.”

“That's right. No matter how sturdy the house's security may be, as long as he lived there, he had as many opportunities to stage it as a theft as he wanted. Yeah, for example... someone disguised as a delivery man attacked my brother, stole the key and raided the storehouse. He could have nurtured a story like that.”

Chizuru leaked a smile.

“You've got quite a mind for improvisation there, Yusuki. Well, that's how it is. And to take it back to the beginning, the ones who would get the insurance payout wouldn't be Kansuke-san, it would be your parents.”

“Ahaha, sure enough... huh? But wait.”

Yuzuki's expression suddenly stiffened.

“It isn't Kondou-san. It isn't Ushijima-san. And my brother's out too... doesn't that mean...”

Yuzuki opened his eyes wide.

“So that person's the culprit, Chizuru-senpai!!?”



“So you were the thief who switched out the vase!?”

Kuragano pointed at Wakamatsu Megumi sitting beside him. The woman who hadn't said a word to that point was flustered by the eyes suddenly gathering on her.

"I-I'm not. I haven't swapped out any vases."

"Don't lie. Now that Officer Atami has ruled out all the other suspects, you're the only one who could be the culprit!"

With his finger still directed at her, Kuragano pushed up his glasses with his other hand.

"You used your position as housekeeper. When the storage was left open to ventilate, you snuck in during the twenty minutes before madam Ushijima came by, and committed the crime. Am I wrong?"

"You're wrong."

Wakamatsu remained obstinate.

"Right, it isn't her."

Atami continued on. Everyone, Wakamatsu and Kuragano included, returned their eyes to him.

"Are you listening? We've used the basis of, 'the risk of the crime being found out', to narrow down our suspects thus far. And if we take it further, Wakamatsu-san is excluded as well... first off, she knew Ushijima-san was coming to the house."

"And what of it?"

Ushijima asked in wonder.

"From then on, a specialist was coming to borrow an art piece from the storehouse. Would she really swap a part right before that? If she was found out, the suspicion would definitely be cast on her. Because besides Kansuke-san and Yuzuki-kun, she was the only one in the house at the time."

"... I see."

Ibusuki nodded. She too had been pulled into Atami's logic.

"If she feared the risk of Ushijima-san noticing the switch, she would have to swap it out after she had gone to the storehouse... but after Ushijima-san came

to the house, Wakamatsu-san didn't have a chance to swap it out. Meaning she isn't the culprit. But in that case, who is the culprit?"

"Right."

Kondou, who had been exempted at the start, pressed Atami further.

"We don't have any other suspects."

"... Has everyone forgotten? After Ushijima-san dropped by the house and saw the storehouse, the other individual who came by the Tsukioka House. And when they entered the living room, they heard Ushijima-san say, 'I'm glad I got to see so many rare articles', so they surely thought Ushijima-san had already looked around the storehouse... He knew Ushijima-san would come by, and he knew the storehouse would be unlocked. With his position, he could loiter around the place without arising suspicions, and when no one was around, he could easily choose at his own discretion when to approach the storehouse."

"Y-you couldn't mean."

Kansuke half-stood to his feet as he looked at Atami.

"That's right. The culprit who swiped the vase from the storehouse was the gardener, Sazanami Tarou-san."

Part 2

“S-Sazanami-san is the culprit who swapped out the vase!?”

Yuzuki dropped his finished popsicle stick.

“No way, I mean he was the one attacked today, wasn’t he? By the culprit who swapped out the vase.”

“No, truth is Sazanami-san was going to swap out another vase today.”

As Yuzuki leaned down to pick up his stick, Chizuru looked over his pale nape as he explained.

“... For now, should we go back?”

“Ah, you’re right.”

The two stood from the bench, discarding their popsicle trash in the bin in front of the store, and walked down the night path.

“So what does that mean? For Sazanami-san to be the culprit.”

“Among the items scattered around the storehouse was a cellphone that had dropped from Sazanami-san’s bag. It likely fell when he got into a fight with the one who attacked him.”

“R-really? I didn’t notice it... but what about it?”

“Why had such a thing fallen? Meaning the problem I’m raising is, ‘Why was Sazanami-san’s bag open?’ You catch my drift?”

“Ah! ... That’s true. Be it zipper or something else, for the contents of a bag to fall out, the bag has to be open.”

“On top of that, why wasn’t his bag on him? Why was it left on the floor? The conclusion that leads to is that Sazanami-san had placed his bag on the storage floor, and was either trying to put in or take something out of it.”

“... Right. Meaning he was trying to change out the vase for a fake.”

“Exactly. But there he was questioned by a third party who entered the room. In his panic, Sazanami-san tried to silence whoever came in and attacked them. Or perhaps he tried to run but was blocked. Anyways, it devolved to a quarrel, and in the end, Sazanami-san was the one who lost the fight. Unluckily, he hit

his head against a corner of the table.”

“... Meaning this was an accident?”

“That’s how it looks.”

Chizuru and Yuzuki walked alongside one another for a while in silence. Whenever they passed beneath the street lights, their uneven shadows would intersect. Yuzuki abruptly peered into Chizuru’s face.

“... Then who was it? The person who ended up injuring Sazanami-san? You already know, don’t you?”

“Yeah. We have decisive evidence... and, the one who made that evidence was you, Yuzuki.”

Yuzuki opened his round eyes in surprise.



“That was an accident...?”

Ushijima Miho gave a mutter mixed with a sigh.

“I still have my questions.”

Kuragano’s face was half-in-doubt. He swung his finger towards Atami.

“In the first place, has it been confirmed that gardener Sazanami was the culprit?”

“What might you mean by that?”

Atami nervously turned to Kuragano.

“It’s true Sazanami may be the only individual who could have swapped the vase out after Madam Ushijima looked around the storage. But you can’t forget Ushijima went back to the storage after that to borrow the vase she came for. She couldn’t have noticed it then?”

“Ah, come to think of it, that’s right.”

The lady in question spoke up.

“... Well then, Ushijima-san. After returning to the storage, did you carefully look at any of the other art pieces?”

“No, I didn’t do that. When I visited the storage a second time, my only goal was to borrow the vase.”

“I see.”

Atami met eyes with everyone gathered as he mouthed the logic he'd memorized.

“These vases, unless you carefully pay attention to every part of them, they're hard to tell apart... Kondou-san demonstrated that not a moment ago.”

“Y-yes.”

Kondou gave a firm nod.

“Unless you look knowing what you're looking for, a piece's authenticity isn't distinct. To rephrase that, making a piece that one would think of as the real thing at first glance is the reason counterfeits exist.”

“Well you may be right about that.”

Kuragano still hung onto the point.

“Whether Ushijima-san would actually notice or not, what becomes a problem here is the, ‘risk that Ushijima-san would notice’... quite a subjective thing indeed. Yet it's this point we've used to narrow down the suspects.”

“But if you at it subjectively, you can't deny Sazanami-san is the most suspicious.” Atami spoke paradoxically, “When he entered the living room that day, Ushijima-san was giving her opinion on the items in the storage. It wouldn't even be strange if he misunderstood she had already completed her business in the storehouse.”

“That's true... but if he thought Madam Ushijima had finished her business in the storehouse, wouldn't he think the storehouse would be closed and give up on the crime?”

“He had been watching vigilantly for his opportunity to commit it for half a year. To him, it wouldn't be strange if he bet on the possibility of the storehouse being unlocked, approaching the place to check it out. From the start, Kansuke-san was a person who'd often forget to lock up, after all.”

“That's right.”

The one to answer wasn't Kansuke himself, but Kondou.

“Today too, when I was working on the pieces in the storehouse, it's because Kansuke-kun walked off with the key that we ended up with time where the place was left wide open.”

“I must apologize for that.”

Kansuke scratched his short hair, “That might be true.”

“Your younger brother Yuzuki said, you ‘can be an airhead when it comes to these sorts of things,’ ... by the way, Kuragano-san?”

“Yeah?”

“Why don’t you want to make Sazanami-san out as the culprit?”

“... Hah?”

“If Sazanami-san is the culprit behind the theft, then the logic that the thief attacked him would no longer stand. In that case, since you were removed for being the only one who couldn’t commit the theft, you would become a suspect in Sazanami-san’s injury... isn’t that why?”

“W-what are you talking about, Officer Atami!? Oy, that’s just plain rude! You’re making it sound as if I’m the culprit here.”

“That’s right. The one who spotted Sazanami-san when he was swapping out a vase in the storage, and injured him in the ensuing quarrel... Kuragano Ryou-san, it was you, wasn’t it?”

Everyone raised a ruckus.

Kansuke cried out, “Really!?”

Detective Ibusuki raised a high, “Haaah?”

Wakamatsu sitting beside Kuragano pulled her body back.

“O-oy, quit joking around!”

Kuragano kicked his chair back as he stood.

“I’m not joking. During your meeting with Kansuke-san, you went to the restroom. I have reason to assume you probably were actually in the bathroom, but after that you headed for the storehouse. Even if it was your first time in the house, that storehouse was visible from the moment you stepped on the premise, so I think you knew the general direction. Your goal in checking out the storehouse was to conduct a simple investigation, right? During your questioning, you said you suspected insurance fraud.”

“You’re imagining things!”

“And right after entering the storage, you witnessed Sazanami-san trying to swap out a vase, and got into a tussle with him. When you pushed him away, he

hit his head on a corner. At that moment, the vase dropped and shattered... perhaps the scream raised at the scream wasn't Sazanami-san's, but yours." "Quit it with your accusations. That's all nothing but conjecture! I kinda get how you got to Sazanami as the thief. But in regards to this incident, even if it wasn't me, everyone here is a suspect. That's right. Don't treat someone as a culprit without any evidence. Doesn't this go against your compliance as a police officer?"

"He's got a point, Atami."

Ibusuki furrowed her brow, "Do you have some evidence?"
"Yes, I do. The fact that Chizuru and Yuzuki-kun rushed to the scene at once."
"... And what of it?"

Kuragano glared at Atami.

"That passage from the main building is thirty meters. The moment it goes outside, the path runs in a straight line... after the culprit heard the scream, where did he run? Whatever the case, he couldn't come back the way he came. Meaning he would have to hide in the shadows somewhere."

"And how does that tie in to me?"

"You're the only one who didn't show his face when everyone gathered in the storehouse, weren't you?"

The first ones to race over were Chizuru and Yuzuki. Then following behind were Kansuke, Kondou, Wakamatsu. And as Wakamatsu went back to get the necessary treatment tools, she passed by Ushijima-san coming from the main house...

"Sure enough, Kuragano-san alone wasn't there."

Kansuke gave a large nod.

"Don't screw with me. I said I was in the bathroom. And I saw those young boys, Chizuru and Yuzuki running down the passage. I'm sure I said that."
"Right, well, since you knew the passage was visible from the bathroom, I think it's true you went. But that was before Sazanami-san was injured."
"Stop interpreting things however's convenient for you!"
"No, this is a fact. I mean, you never saw Chizuru-kun and Yuzuki-kun run up to the storehouse."

“Don’t be stupid. If I didn’t see, then how did I guess it right?”

“… After you wounded Sazanami-san, you heard the footsteps racing over. The lone storehouse in a vast yard. The only place you had to hide was under the walkway.”

“… Under?”

Ibusuki parroted the words.

“Yes, under. Did you notice when we entered the premise? The passage connects to one of the verandas, with space underneath. So Kuragano-san heard the footsteps when the Chizuru Yuzuki pair raced over. With their steps and voices he was able to guess right that they were the first to rush to the scene.”

“That’s a terrible accusation as always. If I was hidden under the passage, what did I do after that?”

“The passage merges with the veranda of the main house. You crept all the way down, so the people above wouldn’t see you. Around the bathing area, you climbed up to the veranda, and mixed in with the rest.”

“I see, that is a possibility. So what’s your evidence?”

“At first, you called Tsukioka Yuzuki a girl. You had mistaken his gender.”

“What basis is that!? You can objectively see that young boy’s looks are overly feminine and misleading, can’t you? I do feel sorry to him for misunderstanding, but that does not a culprit make.”

“That’s right. As a matter of fact, both Ibusuki-san and I mistook his gender when we first saw him. But that was because he was in a hoodie and jeans.”

“… I don’t get what you’re trying to say.”

“Ah!” Kansuke let out a loud voice. “That’s right, that’s exactly right. If Kuragano-san saw Yuzuki running down the passage, he’d definitely not mistake his gender!”

“… Eh?”

Kuragano’s face stiffened.

“C-certainly!”

“That’s right.”

“Ah… come to think of it.”

Kondou, Ushijima and Wakamatsu signaled their agreement. Kuragano turned his face nervously.

"What are you all talking about?"

Kansuke glared sternly at Kuragano.

"You told a lie. The reason being at the time, Yuzuki was wearing his school uniform."

"... Eh?"

"Yuzuki was wearing his school uniform. What's more, someone wearing the exact same uniform... someone you could tell as a boy at a glance... Chizuru-kun was right beside him. So that would mean you didn't see Yuzuki at the time. You were only listening to the sounds after all."

"B-but I get the feeling he was in a hoodie."

"That's because he got blood on him nursing Sazanami-san. He was told to go change with Chizuru-kun."

Receiving Kansuke's explanation, Atami supplemented it.

"... Of course, if Kuragano-san had mistaken Yuzuki-kun's gender, then he'd think it strange for the two of them to head for the bath together. But if Kuragano-san was still hidden under the veranda at that point, there's no helping the outside who didn't know what was where in the house to not feel anything off."

Instantly bathed in everyone's eyes, Kuragano unsteadily drew back and ran into the wall. Crestfallen, he fell to his knees, and covered his face with both hands.

"... I didn't intend to injure him... but he leapt at me, so I suddenly... when I thought of the payment our company would have to put out, it irritated me so much, that perhaps I couldn't hold back..."

Ibusuki mercilessly hoisted up Kuragano's apologizing arm.

"Is it legitimate self-defense, excessive force, or an accident... I don't know the charge, but first we'll be hearing out your story at the station. I won't handcuff you. Just come with us."

Ibusuki looked at Atami, before awkwardly averting her eyes.

Having finished talking, with nowhere to sit, he remained standing when his phone started to ring.

“Yes, it’s Atami. Yes... yes. I see. Thank you.”

Taking his phone from his ear, he turned to Kuragano and Ibusuki.

“Sazanami-san’s operation was a success. There is no need to worry.”

“I see. I feel sorry for doing this to him just after he was injured, but we have to stick an officer on him... give the order.”

And finishing his call, Atami helped Ibusuki to support Kuragano up.

While that was going on, Chizuru and Yuzuki were standing in the room before anyone had realized it.

“Looks like the case has been resolved.”

Chizuru spoke as if it was someone else’s business, a peaceful smile on his face.



That night, during a break in Kuragano’s questioning at the prefectural police headquarters, Atami gave Chizuru a call.

‘Is it Atami-san? Good work back there.’

After calling around ten times, Chizuru finally answered. In that smoking room, there were a number of other officers, so Atami spoke in a soft voice.

“Hello, Chizuru-kun... yeah, well, while it was more forceful than anything, for now it’s a good thing we’ve apprehended the culprit. So how much do I have to pay this time?”

‘Let’s see. Fifty thousand yen should be fine.’

“Oy! That’s no different than before.”

‘What are you talking about? The culprits were Sazanami-san and Kuragano-san. You caught two people, you know. So in essence, I’m giving you a half-off sale.’

“Wait a second. It hasn’t even been a week since that last case. It will be a bit rough to hand over another fifty thousand. Don’t overestimate the salary of a public servant in his twenties!”

He ended up emphasizing something he wasn't proud of at all.

'Then you can pay in installments.'

"Do you have a heart?"

'Society is a cruel mistress.'

"You haven't even gone out into society yet..."

Rather than angry, Atami was fed up, having lost the mind to give a further rebuttal.

"Okay, then it'll be in installments."

"I'll tell you my account number."

"Good grief..."

Atamy scribbled the number in his police notebook and hung up. But Chizuru called back.

'... Did Ibusuki-san suspect anything?'

Atami sighed.

"She's extremely suspicious. She thinks my head suddenly cleared up."

'I'm sure she does. Well, I just can't wait to see what happens next case. Right, right, did she count multiple culprits for this case?'

"Hmm? Oh, you're talking about my penalty. Well, Ibusuki showed some sympathy, and she properly counted it as two."

'Meaning you have to catch another seven. I'll be waiting for your call.'

"Oy, wait!"

Atami had to get a word in.

"I'm not going to turn to the devil again."

'... That's not how I see it.'

Fufu, leaving an ominous laugh, Chizuru hung up the phone.

Right, it was impossible.

Atami knew it somewhere in his heart.

He felt some madness in that boy's deductive abilities. As if a normal officer wouldn't be able to match blades, a repulsive level of insight.

He wouls surely rely on him again. Atami felt it somewhere within him.